

RIVERS PATOUT

Summary: Fr. Rivers Patout, Chaplain and Catholic priest talks to Pat Jasper about setting up the first secular Seafarers Center to provide seafarers with a better quality of life. He discusses learning on the job, cultural clashes, language barriers and the strict laws regarding stowaways. He also talks about how technology has drastically reduced ship crew which has contributed to a sharp decline in the number of people at the seafarer center.

00:00

Interviewer Pat Jasper, Interviewee Father Rivers Patout. At the International Seafarers in Houston. July 26, 2010

Born on the island. Father had masters from Harvard but did not want to work in Navasota so moved to Galveston to work. Moved later to Houston and got his CPA and then dutifully went back to Navasota. First job was at the store selling clothes. Also did some beekeeping. Had to sell honey for allowance.

Wanted to go to Catholic School after graduating high school. Picked Notre Dame. Went to become a lawyer, businessman but changed to Philosophy the first week. Graduated and worked in the seminary in Houston. Ordained in 1976. First assignment was at Port - Blessed Sacrament. Had stereotyped the workers. On the contrary the workers are all family oriented men who were tolerant of every religion and race. Was first Catholic priest to join high coast international counselor seafarers agency. first to offer a school and medical facilities. chaplain training school.

Fortunate to have a number of people interested. Number of socialites offered help. First president was a Belgian who had seen deprivation of the sea in his early days. Terrible food. believed in giving seafarers a better life. If seafarers have a place where they can complain about their job, they become better workers.

12:10

Had swimming pool, pool table etc in under construction hubs. Building opened in 1973 and by then knew how to be better chaplains to seafarers. Christmas Gift program. Ask local businesses etc to make a shoebox of goodies. Wrap it and put name and address on box so they can send thank you notes. New York city seamen centers had been doing this for years and called when the strike was on and said they have 1000s of extra gift packages and wondered if Houston wanted any. Got gift packages.

15:06

Athletic program was very important. Norway had a Norwegian welfare assoc. dealt with the well being of Norwegian sea farers in athletics and football, swimming etc. Had

literature in Norwegian. Cooperation in sea farer ministry. Had interfaith ministers. Imam during Ramadan and even a Rabbi. Tried to be as open and helpful. Do not proselytize. Has worked out very well over the years.

18:46

Wanted the chapel to be open to people of different faiths. For Islam, muslims face east and pray on a prayer rug. Had a rug donated and at next mass invited the Muslim attendees to pray. Pointed out the prayer rug and also told them which side was East. But did not illicit any smiles because was standing on the prayer rug with shoes on. Small lessons learnt while dealing with so many cultures. Have travelled around the world to countries where seafarers come from. Have stayed in their homes. Been very educational. Very enriching for those working in the seafaring ministry.

20:45

During the Cold war, there were a lot of Russian ships. Russians did not want their seafarers to be influenced by capitalism. Had a commissar on board in charge of political thought. Against the rules for them to take Bibles. Put plain, brown covers on the Bibles and when Commissar wasn't looking, used to take them. Would not pass them out or take them aboard a ship.

Went aboard this one ship during Christmas time. Called Christmas gifts, New Year's gifts since they did not celebrate a Christian holiday. Captain wanted them but Commissar did not. Opened one and found socks, writing paper etc. Said was not able to accept it because had no gifts to return. Took a drink of Vodka/Cuban Rum instead.

25:07

There were many cultural differences every time a ship came in. Could tell the nationality of the crew by looking at the flag at the back of the ship. Food, drink habits were all different and unique.

28:25

Started out by going to Catholic centers, all that he knew, sea farer center was built around one identity. But when elected as the first Catholic of a non-Catholic center then began to learn about other faiths. With the sea farers club did not have to be of a particular faith to attend. Anyone could walk in.

30:25

Pilot's list. Earlier days had to rely on friends made, like mooring people that tie the boat up. Had to get all information from them. Sometimes the condition onboard ships used to be terrible. No plumbing, no air-conditioning, living conditions were bad. Used to warn one another on the port about incoming ships. Social justice. Coastguard grading system. Jones Act states if crew has not been paid for a certain number of days deliberately then the crew gets double the pay and can impound the ship.

35:37

Instituted very strict laws about stowaway. law says anybody that would be a stowaway had to be maintained by the ship company and could not be flown home, had to be carried back to their country and until the ship went back to the country, stowaway was in the care of the ship and expense of the ship. Terrible burden. Filipino seafarers were asked to kill some stowaways they found on board Couldn't do it. So they were hid until they came to the club, Happened on the Gulf coast right up to Canada.

37:50

Pilots share their lists that details their crew, when they arrive, when they leave, agent, making connections. Keeping records much better. Changes - time in port and number of people on ship. then, average 40 members on ship. Now just about 20 people. Earlier ship used to stay for a week. Enough time to socialize etc. Now two days is a long time in port. No time for anything to be used at the center. Have not played soccer on the soccer field for years. Less women. Worst thing to happen to seafarers is homeland security. Restrictions are severe. Expensive visas. Reputation of America has deteriorated. Transportation and worker identification. TWIC. No TWIC card, can't get near a ship. Quality of crew has also reduced. Good ones do not want to suffer the humiliation. Changes since 9/11.

43:20

TEchnology reduced the number of ship crew. Earlier there were a lot of back breaking jobs, now done automatically. Not even a radio operator on board. Computers do most of the work. Economics. Containers. No human doing any lifting. Cranes.

46:00

Would minister to stowaways as well. Would bring them magazines or whatever else they would need to get through their time in a locked room. Tried to make it more humane. None of the rivalries that exist in the world between religions are hardly ever the problem. Usually something personal. One of the biggest challenges is dietary when dealign with seafarers of different nationalities on board one particular ship. -Sometimes crew is very reluctant to talk to authority. do some mediation. Salary. Common practice to keep two sets of books. Seafarers can't complain. Will get wages but will lose job. Reluctant to complain even when injustice was there. Penalties. Sometimes can't do anything about the injustice if no one will speak up.

52:25

Soccer fields. had uniforms that players could use. 1-2 games every night. Norwegians maintained the field. Rivalry between two ships. Sometimes would bring in local team out to play. Great form of recreation. Active and fun participation in the earlier days.

53:55

Earlier days it was common to have 200 people a night at the center. Did not even have 11 people last night. Ministry is as active as it has even been.

56:40

There were always minor repairs to be made but again major factors while operating a ship has definitely changed. Even repairs are much quicker. Hire an expert from ashore to do some of the things that sailors had to do earlier. Simulator program on how to pilot a ship.

59:26

Vatican 2 happened and it changed the Catholic church, changed the attitude of the world too. Pope John XXIII. Opened the idea that it was not a sin to cooperate and collaborate with non-Catholics. After the 60s, a time of Vietnam, politics Very exciting times for a young priest. Ecumenical work, social work. While in the seminary was not allowed to leave seminary grounds except during Easter, Christmas and summer. One time went to the rector and asked to leave the grounds to see the doctor. Were always allowed to see the doctor. Then went to see Dr. Zhivago. Was not even allowed to read the secular newspapers except for comics and sports. No television except for the news and lights were turned off at 10 pm. one of this exists anymore.

1:04:27

Wonderful ecumenical people. Some Orthodox members for a number of years. Was born in 1938.

1:05:51

Strike of 1960s. Barely associated with the Port. Did not know anything about the economic factor. Had sailor come in and do some work. Workers lost their income. ((SOMEONE WALKS IN))

1:08:00

(Shows scrapbook from earlier days)

Union busting, attacking scabs. That time there were three unions - black, white and Mexican. Unions loved the strike. Owners hated it. Started out as an issue of segregation. Workers did not want to be in the same union with someone not from their race. Came from one of the most segregated areas in the US - Grimes County. Segregated in schools, back schools, white schools. Went to Notre Dame and came out of that culture. Thought it was going to be a battleground but turned out to be one of the most peaceful integrations. Since it was a small town and even though locals were going to be integrated, everyone knew everyone. Started winning football games when schools were integrated.

1:13:15

open 7 days a week. Now less hours than in the earlier days. All volunteers. Ran the store, bar etc. Now mostly paid people. Paid by own denomination. Very few volunteers now. Was very spirited before. All kinds of parties. Never let a holiday go past without a celebration. Volunteers were mainly from churches, and from just about anywhere. Females who wanted to meet sailors.

1:16:12

The port of Houston has always been a hidden secret. as well known as will ever be. Bigger community of Houston has not connected with the fact that Houston has a port. Port has done a lot for the city. Not less connected to the community. Fewer public parties are organized. strict homeland security policies make it harder for parties to be organized. Nautical school. World Trade school. Port is doing a lot of PR in the education sector.

1:18:47

Festival 3 day event. Friday night - Shrimp ball by the Propeller club. 2-day cook off - barbecue, best decorated stall. Volleyball and soccer tournament. Terrific way for the maritime community to come together. One of the worst things to happen - cancellation of the Maritime festival.